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Co-worker reactions to i-deals through the lens of social comparison: The role of fairness and emotions

Abstract

The individualization of working conditions has culminated in the form of ‘i-deals,’ which are uniquely negotiated arrangements between employees (i-dealers) and their supervisor. Implementing such deals, however, only makes sense when their benefits outweigh their costs. To assess their merit, co-worker reactions should be considered. Do i-deals trigger fairness perceptions and emotions among co-workers? And how do these factors influence co-workers’ behaviors? To date, the cognitive and emotional mechanisms of co-workers’ behavioral reactions have been underdeveloped. In this paper, we build on social comparison theory to develop a process model. We argue that social comparison is not a given, as co-workers might not necessarily compare themselves with the i-dealer. Yet, if they engage in comparison, this can be upward when they feel disadvantaged or, alternatively, downward. Such comparisons include a unique set of emotions and fairness perceptions, which, together, influence co-workers’ behaviors positively or negatively. Moreover, we argue that the boundary conditions of the relational context within which i-deals unfold play an important role. Our model offers theoretical insights into co-worker reactions to i-deals as well as a future research agenda. The model also aids practitioners in understanding co-workers’ reactions and in guiding them to experience positive reactions.

Keywords: i-deal, social comparison, fairness, emotions, co-worker reactions

Inspired by a trend toward individualization, a growing body of research has focused on i-deals, defined as ‘voluntary, personalized agreements of a non-standard nature negotiated between individual employees and their employers regarding terms that benefit both’ (Rousseau, 2005: 23). I-deals involve unique training and development opportunities, work flexibility, personalized financial deals or modifications to tasks and responsibilities (Rosen et al., 2013; Rousseau et al., 2009). Organizations can use i-deals to attract, motivate and retain employees (see Liao et al. (2016) for a meta-analytic overview of their benefits). Yet, at the same time, studies have emerged that highlight the danger of such deals, as they single out one employee within a team by offering him/her a potentially more advantageous outcome. As a result, an important question is how co-workers respond to such arrangements, as they can counteract an i-deal’s benefits (e.g., through counterproductive behaviors). While studies have acknowledged that i-deals trigger cognitive, emotional and behavioral responses among co-workers (e.g., Garg and Fulmer, 2017; Marescaux et al., 2019; Ng, 2017), there is no clear and comprehensive insight into the underlying process explaining these reactions.

In acknowledging this gap, we develop a process model that relies on social comparison theory and extends our current understanding of how co-workers react to i-deals. We argue that co-workers are inclined to compare themselves with i-dealers to assess their relative standing, yet are more likely to do so when the i-deal is seen as desirable, when the distance between the i-dealer and co-worker is low, and when information on the i-deal is available (Kulik and Ambrose, 1992). We subsequently incorporate different types of social comparisons (i.e., upward and downward), which are determined by the favorability of the co-worker’s i-deals, relative to those of the i-dealer (Vidyarthi et al., 2016). This comparison (upward/downward), combined with a cognitive appraisal of the situation (i.e., fairness perceptions), influences co-workers’ emotional responses.

To clarify the broad spectrum of emotions, we distinguish emotions depending on their upward/downward and assimilative/comparative nature (Smith, 2000). Next, we explore how these emotional responses trigger behaviors. In doing so, we distinguish between the valence of the behavior (positive, negative) and its target (organization or i-dealer) (Garg and Fulmer, 2017). Finally, we identify boundary conditions that influence co-workers' cognitive, emotional and behavioral responses. Specifically, we focus on relationship-oriented boundary conditions at the individual (i.e., social value orientation), dyadic (i.e., co-worker and i-dealer exchange relationship) and triadic level (i.e., leader-member exchange social comparison). We employ these conditions as our focus because i-deals are inherently relational in emerging from a negotiation process that involves different parties (i.e., i-dealer, supervisor, co-workers) (Lai et al., 2009).

With this process model, we significantly contribute to the current discussion of i-deals. While social comparison is often cited as the process in which co-worker reactions to i-deals are rooted (e.g., Garg and Fulmer, 2017; Marescaux et al., 2019; Ng, 2017), our model additionally unravels when and how co-workers are more likely to socially compare themselves with an i-dealer, and highlights the subsequent process through which co-workers' reactions arise. We acknowledge that co-workers can, depending on their relative standing and fairness perceptions, experience different emotions that result in different action tendencies. Moreover, compared to other organizational events that trigger social comparison (e.g., pay dispersion), the heterogeneity of i-deals creates a unique context to study social comparison. Since every i-deal is unique, many contextual factors need to be taken into account, which is why we address several boundary conditions. Next, we challenge the notion that assimilative (contrastive) emotions mainly result in positive (negative) behaviors (e.g., Lange and Boecker, 2019; Lange and Crusius, 2015; Li et al., 2019). Instead, we identify conditions that counteract or reverse these natural action tendencies,

thereby contributing to the emotions literature. As a final point, the model (Figure 1) helps us to formulate research implications and a research agenda, and to specify practical recommendations.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Social comparison triggered by i-deals

According to social comparison theory, people compare themselves with others to define and evaluate the self, reduce uncertainty and seek self-enhancement (Brown et al., 2007). At work, this inclination implies that employees seek out referent others to compare themselves with regarding their own outcomes (e.g., rewards and working conditions), performances and social relationships (Greenberg et al., 2007). The increased use of i-deals in organizations (Liao et al., 2016) makes this theory highly relevant. As i-deals are individualized working conditions, they create outcome differences between employees (Rousseau, 2005). If an i-deal is allocated to an employee (i.e., the i-dealer), this allocation can trigger a social comparison process among co-workers in an effort to evaluate the favorability of their own outcomes. Yet, whether or not this process occurs depends on whether the i-dealer is selected as a referent. Social comparison theory advances two elements that increase the likelihood of social comparison: (1) the relevance of the object and referent of social comparison and (2) the availability of information (Kulik and Ambrose, 1992).

First, social comparisons are more important to employees when the object of comparison is desirable or relevant to their self-image (i.e., by addressing their personal goals or needs) as only then can the comparison affect their self-evaluations (Lockwood and Kunda, 1997; Normand and Croizet, 2013). Whether an i-deal is considered desirable would depend on the co-worker's personal situation, more specifically the extent to which the i-deal addresses a need or desire shared by him/her. Some i-deals (e.g., job sharing, personalized job training or work schedules) comprise

solutions for individual issues or specific needs (e.g., to overcome skill-, health- or stress-related issues, to balance work with the care for young children), which are not necessarily shared by co-workers (Marescaux et al., 2019). Therefore, if the i-deal is not seen as personally desirable, co-workers are less likely to engage in social comparison. Yet, if the i-deal is personally relevant to the co-worker because it addresses a more universal need (e.g., financial i-deals) or addresses a specific need shared by the co-worker as well, he/she is more likely to engage in social comparison.

Second, for the comparison referent to be relevant and information to be available, a close relationship between the co-worker and i-dealer is necessary (Normand and Croizet, 2013; Goodman and Haisley, 2007). The distance between the co-worker and i-dealer plays an essential role. The lower the psychological (e.g., perceived similarity regarding personality, job, experience, etc.), functional (e.g., mutual understanding) and/or structural (e.g., the opportunity to interact, interdependence) distance, the higher the likelihood that a social comparison process will be triggered (Goodman and Haisley, 2007; Obloj and Zenger, 2017). Finally, the transparency of i-deal negotiations is significant because when supervisors are able to hide all relevant information (both regarding the i-deal and the reasons for it), they reduce the likelihood of co-workers engaging in social comparison as they are simply not aware of the i-deal (Liao et al., 2016).

P1: Co-workers are more likely to engage in social comparison when (a) they perceive the i-deal as desirable, (b) they perceive a low distance between themselves and the i-dealer and (c) the i-deal is communicated to co-workers.

Social comparison can take two distinct forms, which have vastly different consequences: upward (comparing with someone better off) or downward (comparing with someone worse off) (Brown et al., 2007). As such, it is important to predict the direction in which co-workers will be steered. Essentially, this direction will depend on the relative position of a co-worker compared to

the i-dealer in terms of the number and nature of i-deals that both possess. As i-deals can have both benefits (i.e., by answering specific needs, facilitating work-life balance and providing recognition; Rousseau, 2005) and costs (i.e., by endangering opportunities for future outcomes, such as pay raises and promotions), co-workers can perform a cost/benefit analysis of their own set of i-deals compared to the costs/benefits of the i-dealer's set of i-deals. In doing so, co-workers will perceive either favorable or unfavorable i-deals compared to the i-dealer. This process closely reflects the notion of relative i-deals (Vidyarthi et al., 2016), that is defined as an employee's perception of how his/her level of i-deals differs from the group. In the dyadic social comparison between co-worker and i-dealer that we focus on, the co-worker's relative set of i-deals (with its costs and benefits) compared to the i-dealer's set of i-deals will thus play an important role. When co-workers perceive themselves to enjoy more favorable i-deals compared to the i-dealer, they will engage in downward comparison, while the opposite perception will lead to upward comparison.

P2: Co-workers engage in downward (upward) comparison when they perceive themselves to possess relatively more (less) favorable i-deals than the i-dealer.

Reactions to downward and upward social comparison

Two distinct processes are initiated by social comparison: a cognitive and an emotional one (e.g., Kim and Glomb, 2014; Smith, 2000). The cognitive process implies that, irrespective of the comparison direction (upward or downward), co-workers will evaluate the deservingness of i-deals (cf. distributive fairness), the procedures behind the granting of i-deals (cf. procedural fairness) and the communication regarding the i-deals (cf. interactional fairness) (Lai et al., 2009). Moreover, social comparisons activate an emotional process (Greenberg et al., 2007). These emotions depend on the comparison direction (upward/downward) and are personally pleasant or unpleasant to experience (Smith, 2000). As i-deal comparisons place a particular focus on what

the i-dealer lacks (possesses) and what the self possesses (lacks), the resulting emotions should have a natural dual focus on both the self and the i-dealer (e.g., envy, sympathy) (Smith, 2000). Hence, the emotions emanating from social comparisons in the context of i-deals are inherently social in being focused on the co-worker and i-dealer interaction (Blader et al., 2013). Past research has conceptualized social emotions in three ways: as situational (a general experience; Duffy et al., 2012), dispositional (Lange and Crusius, 2015; Leach et al., 2003) or episodic (triggered by one specific event; Cohen-Charash, 2009; Li et al., 2019). The latter category fits especially well within the i-deals context. For episodic emotions to occur, the experience of a single event is sufficient, for example, a referent co-worker receiving an i-deal (Cohen-Charash and Mueller, 2007; Li et al., 2019). Moreover, while there can be multiple i-deals in a team, the content of and context surrounding each deal will be unique, affecting the development of co-workers' emotions. Building on this research, we further explore the cognitive and emotional process triggered by i-deals, as well as their subsequent behavioral impact on coworkers (see Figure 2).

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Downward social comparison

Downward comparisons give rise to emotions associated with superiority, which are either assimilative or contrastive (Smith, 2000). Assimilative comparisons imply that co-workers focus on the similarity between themselves and the i-dealer, believing that they could also end up in a similar, less favorable situation ('that person could be me') (Buunk and Gibbons, 2007). Contrastive comparisons lead co-workers to focus on the gap between themselves and the i-dealer, and to believe their superiority will persist in the future ('that person is not and will never be me') (Greenberg et al., 2007). Appraisal theory suggests that people evaluate certain elements of the

situation, which subsequently guides them toward specific vicarious emotions (Wondra and Ellsworth, 2015). One key situational element that drives either assimilative or contrastive emotions is employees' perceived control over the situation (Buunk and Gibbons, 2007; Smith, 2000; Wondra and Ellsworth, 2015). What matters is whether co-workers believe they have control over their ability to remain superior. If co-workers perceive high control, they believe they will never be in the i-dealer's inferior situation, fostering a contrastive emotion. This type of emotion would take the form of *schadenfreude*, or pleasure in one's superiority, a sense of pride and contempt toward the i-dealer (Li et al., 2019; Smith, 2000). Yet, if perceived control is low, the co-worker believes he/she could lose his/her superior position in the future and an assimilative emotion surfaces. This implies that co-workers empathize with the inferior i-dealer, feel pity toward him/her as well as fear or worry that they themselves could lose their superiority. This reaction is reflected in the emotion of sympathy (Exline and Lobel, 1999; Smith, 2000).

In line with the control model of justice, perceived control comes from fair decision-making (Cropanzano et al., 2007). This is where the cognitive process in social comparison comes into play. If a co-worker believes that the i-deal is allocated using fair criteria, procedures and communications, he/she will perceive a high probability of obtaining favorable outcomes and maintaining his/her superiority in the future (Cropanzano et al., 2007; Lai et al., 2009), which will lead to *schadenfreude* (Wondra and Ellsworth, 2015). Conversely, if a co-worker finds the i-deal to be unfairly granted, this reaction will diminish his/her feeling of control and perception of his/her own probability of obtaining favorable outcomes in the future, and enhance the belief that he/she could lose his/her superiority, which will lead to the formation of sympathy (Smith, 2000).

P3: Downward social comparison among co-workers triggers feelings of (a) *schadenfreude* when fairness perceptions are high and (b) sympathy when fairness perceptions are low.

Upward social comparison

Upward comparisons give rise to feelings of inferiority that are often associated with envy (Smith, 2000). Envy surfaces when a person ‘lacks another’s superior quality, achievement, or possession and either desires it or wishes that the other lacked it’ (Parrott and Smith, 1993: 906). Early research considered envy to be dysfunctional (e.g., triggering social undermining) (e.g., Cohen-Charash, 2009). Yet, because studies showed envy to also trigger functional behaviors (e.g., increased effort), a dual envy theory was developed acknowledging both benign and malicious envy (Van de Ven et al., 2009). Recently, Lange et al. (2018) also integrated the notion of pain (Tai et al., 2012) such that envy entails emotional pain, which manifests as benign or malicious envy. Empirical research has revealed that both forms of envy are characterized by pain, yet only malicious envy includes negative feelings of resentment and a desire to pull the other person down (Van de Ven et al., 2009). This is because malicious envy is a contrastive emotion that leads employees to focus on the gap between themselves and the other and feel unable to reach the other’s superior position (Smith, 2000). Benign envy, in contrast, implies a positive motivation to improve one’s own position, which comes from a belief that what the referent person possesses is attainable, making it an assimilative emotion (Van de Ven et al., 2012). As such, co-workers’ perceived control will also play a determining role in the development of envy (Lai et al., 2009; Smith, 2000). If the co-worker perceives high fairness in the i-deal allocation, he/she will perceive a high likelihood that the gap can be closed, which causes benign envy. On the other hand, if the co-worker perceives low fairness in the i-deal allocation, his/her perceived chances of closing the gap are low (Lai et al., 2009), which causes malicious envy. In their research on mentoring, Higgins and Nohria (1999) similarly refer to this phenomenon as the ‘sidekick effect,’ arguing that an employee’s unearned favorable treatment (i.e., early mentoring) triggers negative co-worker

reactions (resulting in what we would argue to be malicious envy) as they consider the employee to be the supervisor's sidekick, which is a seemingly unattainable position for them. In contrast, earned favorable treatment (i.e., late mentoring) is more positively received by co-workers as they consider the situation fair and attainable (in our model resulting in benign envy).

P4: Upward social comparison among co-workers triggers feelings of (a) benign envy when perceptions of fairness are high and (b) malicious envy when perceptions of fairness are low.

Behavioral consequences

Emotions are strong predictors of behaviors (Kaplan et al., 2009). We distinguish between those that are interpersonal (targeting the i-dealer) and those that target the organization. This distinction is commonly adopted in research on work behaviors (e.g., Robinson and Bennet, 1995). Moreover, we distinguish between positive and negative behaviors depending on whether they are beneficial or harmful to their target. Positive behaviors could manifest as helping behaviors (vs. the i-dealer) and job efforts (vs. the organization). Negative behaviors could include social undermining (vs. the i-dealer) and neglect (vs. the organization).

Sympathy and schadenfreude. Sympathy is a personally unpleasant emotion as it entails concern and worry about the referent other's and one's own situation (Smith, 2000). As a result, co-workers will focus on eliminating this feeling. The prime action tendency behind sympathy is to help the referent other through prosocial behaviors to bring him/her closer to one's own situation (Park et al., 2019). Yet, at the same time, such actions can undercut one's own job efforts as they shift the focus from one's own self-interests to the other, taking up valuable resources (e.g., time, effort) (Bolino and Grant, 2016). In support of this logic, Longmire and Harrison (2018) found that, because of sympathetic concerns, employees sacrifice their own performance. Moreover, sympathy is often associated with moral outrage toward the cause of this need for sympathy (i.e.,

the organization), resulting in a motivation to retaliate (Antonetti and Maklan, 2016; Montada and Schneider, 1989). Sympathy may thus lead to positive behaviors toward the i-dealer (e.g., helping), yet at the same time may also imply negative behaviors toward the organization (e.g., neglect).

P5a: Sympathy leads to positive (negative) behaviors toward the i-dealer (organization).

Schadenfreude is characterized by pleasure concerning one's own superiority. It is believed to boost one's self-view and to motivate employees to establish and protect their dominance, thereby emphasizing and increasing the distance between themselves and the referent (Brambilla and Riva, 2017; Lange and Boecker, 2019). This is especially true as schadenfreude could be combined with a sense of righteousness, which – in our model – would be drawn from the fact that the co-worker's superior situation is considered to reflect fair treatment by the supervisor (and by extension, the organization) (Li et al., 2019). As a result, this 'righteous' schadenfreude would trigger negative behaviors toward the i-dealer (e.g., social undermining) to reinforce the i-dealer's inferiority and protect their own superiority (Li et al., 2019). By the same logic, schadenfreude also encourages positive co-worker behaviors toward the organization to conserve their superior position and as a means to reciprocate the righteousness of their superior position. To accomplish this, employees draw from the high self-esteem that accompanies schadenfreude (Brambilla and Riva, 2017).

P5b: Schadenfreude leads to negative (positive) behaviors toward the i-dealer (organization).

Malicious and benign envy. Malicious envy involves hostility and resentment toward the other and is characterized by wounded self-esteem (Lange et al., 2018). Hence, employees are motivated to alleviate this emotion, restore their self-esteem, and reduce the gap between themselves and the envied person by pulling him/her and his/her superiority down (Duffy et al., 2012). Accordingly, malicious envy triggers behaviors that harm the envied person (e.g., social undermining) (Cohen-Charash and Mueller, 2007). Moreover, malicious envy is often coupled with anger toward the

organization that caused the (unfair) inequality in the first place (Leach, 2008), causing workers to retaliate against the organization (e.g., neglect, withdrawal; Duffy and Shaw, 2000).

P6a: Malicious envy leads to negative behaviors, both toward the i-dealer and organization.

Benign envy, on the other hand, lacks hostility and resentment but includes the determination to improve oneself, be like the envied person and pull oneself up to his/her level, which is why it directly increases effort and performance as a primary way to achieve higher outcomes (Bamberger and Belogolovsky, 2017; Lange et al., 2018; Van de Ven, 2017). Moreover, it may be accompanied by a feeling of gratitude or appreciation towards the organization that treats its employees fairly to which employees reciprocate (Smith and Kim, 2007). Yet, benign envy also motivates interpersonal behaviors (e.g., helping the envied other) to advance oneself (Van de Ven et al., 2009). This indirectly increases employees' outcomes as supervisors can interpret them as signs of motivation and commitment (Podsakoff et al., 2009). Moreover, getting close to the envied person can help the employee learn how to achieve higher outcomes (Lee and Duffy, 2018).

P6b: Benign envy leads to positive behaviors, both toward the organization and i-dealer.

Interaction between assimilative and contrastive emotions. The two emotions emanating from (upward/downward) comparisons can also interact. Schadenfreude and sympathy are not necessarily opposites but can co-exist when employees have ambivalent feelings toward their own superiority (Exline and Zell, 2012). Similarly, positive correlations exist between malicious and benign envy (Lange et al., 2018; Van de Ven, 2017). This finding is consistent with the evaluative space model of ambivalence (Cacioppo et al., 1997) suggesting that employees can experience opposing emotions. Ashforth et al. (2014) argued that employees could resolve the ambivalence in different ways: through avoidance (i.e., not reacting to either emotion), compromise (i.e., reacting moderately to both emotions), domination (i.e., reaction to only one emotion) or holism

(i.e., reacting intensely to both emotions). The strategy that is chosen depends on its effectiveness in relieving the tension between both emotions as well as in producing benefits for the employee.

In the context of *schadenfreude* and sympathy, we argue that co-workers will be steered toward a compromising strategy. Compromising acts as a coping mechanism when partially honoring each emotion is both possible and beneficial (Ashforth et al., 2014). *Schadenfreude* and sympathy can co-exist by combining a moderate degree of sympathy's positive actions toward the i-dealer and *schadenfreude*'s positive actions toward the organization. This combination benefits co-workers in several ways: both actions (1) feed their self-interest (through anticipated rewards), (2) satisfy and alleviate both emotions by not only protecting their own position (cf. *schadenfreude*), but also helping the i-dealer (cf. sympathy) and (3) help alleviate co-workers' potentially ambivalent feelings toward the organization (moving back and forth between outrage and righteousness). Thus, when both emotions are high, the adverse effects of *schadenfreude* (toward the i-dealer) and sympathy (toward the organization) would be negated. Yet, the positive consequences of *schadenfreude* (toward the organization) and sympathy (toward the i-dealer), would be weakened to a moderate state, as enacting both emotions requires substantial resources (time and energy).

P7a: The negative behavioral consequences of sympathy (*schadenfreude*) toward the organization (i-dealer) are negated when *schadenfreude* (sympathy) is high.

P7b: The positive behavioral consequences of sympathy (*schadenfreude*) toward the i-dealer (organization) are weakened when *schadenfreude* (sympathy) is high.

In contrast, in the context of malicious and benign envy, we expect co-workers to be directed to a domination strategy. Ashforth et al. (2014) argued that domination occurs when the action tendencies behind the ambivalent emotions are counterproductive. The negative consequences of malicious envy (toward the organization and i-dealer) would counteract the motivation to advance

oneself, which is inherent to benign envy, as these consequences reduce the co-worker's odds of achieving better outcomes in the future (Bamberger and Belogolovsky, 2017). To relieve this tension and to benefit the employee, a domination strategy is necessary. Considering employees' inherent needs for self-enhancement, development and growth (Brambilla and Riva, 2017), we expect co-workers to be dominated by benign envy, i.e. by their motivation to pull themselves up and reciprocate the gratitude towards the organization. This implies that benign envy negates the impact of malicious envy, while malicious envy does not interfere with the impact of benign envy.

P8a: The negative behavioral consequences of malicious envy toward the i-dealer/organization are negated by benign envy.

P8b: The positive behavioral consequences of benign envy exist independent of malicious envy.

Boundary conditions of the model

To further improve our insights, we identify boundary conditions that are relationship-oriented. I-deals are inherently relational as they emerge from a two-party negotiation between i-dealer and supervisor. Yet, co-workers act as a third party, such that relationship-oriented boundary conditions within this triad are significant (Rousseau, 2005). Hence, our boundary conditions account for the three parties involved by considering the individual (i.e., co-worker), dyadic (i.e., co-worker and i-dealer) and triadic (i.e., co-worker, i-dealer and supervisor) level. We describe how these boundary conditions affect fairness perceptions, emotions and the behavioral reactions.

Individual level. We focus on social value orientation as a trait that reflects co-workers' preference for the distribution of outcomes between themselves and others (Murphy et al., 2011). Scholars distinguish between prosocial and proself employees (De Cremer and Van Lange, 2001). Prosocials are motivated to maximize their own and others' outcomes (Anderson and Patterson, 2008). In contrast, proself employees emphasize their own outcomes in the sense that some are

motivated to maximize them (also called individualists), while others wish to maximize their relative advantage over others (also called competitors) (Bogaert et al., 2008). Hence, prosocials are more cooperative and caring toward others, while proself employees are guided by self-interest and, in extreme cases, self-interest at the expense of others (Murphy et al., 2011).

We argue that social value orientation influences co-workers' fairness perceptions, yet differently for upward and downward comparison. Prosocials are guided more strongly by justice rules (equality, equity and need concerns) than proselfs (Anderson and Patterson, 2008). While prosocials find equal outcomes to be fairest, they accept a disadvantage (an upward comparison) insofar as the other employee's favorable outcome addresses a need and/or serves as a reward for the delivered input (which is typically the purpose of i-deals) (Anderson and Patterson, 2008; De Cremer and Van Lange, 2001). Proself employees, however, react with self-interest in mind, focusing only on their own outcomes or considering someone else's gain to be their loss, leading them to question the fairness of an upward comparison. Supporting this theory, fairness perceptions are lower for proself employees (compared to prosocials) when they are faced with an upward comparison (Anderson and Patterson, 2008). In an upward comparison resulting from an i-deal, we expect prosocial employees to develop more favorable perceptions of fairness, which would subsequently guide them toward benign envy (cf. P4). In contrast, proself employees would perceive the i-deal as less fair, increasing the odds that they would feel malicious envy (cf. P4).

P9a: In an upward i-deal comparison, prosocials develop more favorable fairness perceptions than proself co-workers, leading the former to feel more benign envy and the latter to feel more malicious envy.

Conversely, in a downward comparison, prosocials feel uncomfortable in the advantaged position because of their inherent concern for other people's welfare, which ultimately reduces

their fairness perceptions (Anderson and Patterson, 2008; Murphy et al., 2011). Meanwhile, from the perspective of self-interest that is dominant in proself employees as well as a self-serving bias (Shin and Sohn, 2015), proselfs will typically consider the downward comparison to be more fair (Anderson and Patterson, 2008). In other words, in a downward comparison triggered by an i-deal, proself co-workers will develop more favorable fairness perceptions, which subsequently increase the odds that they will experience *schadenfreude*, while prosocials will develop less favorable fairness perceptions, more likely guiding them toward sympathy (cf. P3).

P9b: In a downward i-deal comparison, proself co-workers develop more favorable fairness perceptions than prosocials, leading the former to feel more *schadenfreude* and the latter to feel more sympathy.

Next, we propose that social value orientation is also significant in terms of co-workers' subsequent behaviors. Proself co-workers focus on their self-interest (Murphy et al., 2011), which is why the self-serving reactions emanating from *schadenfreude* and benign envy are reinforced in an effort to protect their superiority or achieve stronger outcomes relative to the i-dealer. This self-serving bias would be most visible in their reactions toward the organization as these reactions are the prime and direct ways of being rewarded by the organization (Bamberger and Belogolovsky, 2017). Yet, at the same time, co-workers could also demonstrate negative behaviors that would benefit them at the expense of the organization. Proself employees have a more self-serving view of morality, lacking care for others (Murphy et al., 2011), which is why, across situations, they engage more in deception and selfish lies to maximize their individual outcomes or to prevent losses (Reinders Folmer and De Cremer, 2012). Similarly, Lange et al. (2018) found that benign envy also triggered Machiavellian behaviors (e.g., manipulative tactics), which would especially serve proself employees guided by self-interest. Hence, for proself co-workers, *schadenfreude* and

benign envy could spark discordant, yet self-serving, behaviors that are both positive and negative for the organization. Following the same logic, when co-workers feel malicious envy or sympathy, negative reactions toward the organization (e.g., neglect) are weakened for proself co-workers as these reactions potentially place their own outcomes at risk by lowering their performance evaluations and subsequent rewards (Bamberger and Belogolovsky, 2017).

P9c: For proself co-workers, benign envy and schadenfreude (malicious envy and sympathy) are more (less) strongly related to positive (negative) behaviors toward the organization. Benign envy and schadenfreude can, however, also trigger negative behaviors toward the organization.

In contrast, prosocial co-workers' main goal is to care for the welfare of others (Anderson and Patterson, 2008; Murphy et al., 2011). Hence, we would expect their reactions toward the i-dealer to be especially influenced by their emotions. When feeling sympathy or benign envy, co-workers' positive reactions toward the i-dealer should logically be reinforced for prosocials, as those reactions fit their cooperative and caring nature (Murphy et al., 2011). By the same logic, negative behaviors toward the i-dealer resulting from schadenfreude or malicious envy should be buffered. Supporting this logic, Bamberger and Belogolovsky (2017) found that the threshold for prosocials to withhold help when feeling malicious envy is higher than that of proself employees.

P9d: For prosocial co-workers, benign envy and sympathy (malicious envy and schadenfreude) are more (less) strongly related to positive (negative) behaviors toward the i-dealer.

Dyadic level. At this level, we focus on the co-worker and i-dealer exchange relationship. A strong exchange implies a close, warm relationship with mutual trust, respect and concern, whereas a weak relationship means the parties experience dislike, distrust, hostility and/or conflict (Omilion-Hodges and Baker, 2013; Exline and Lobel, 2001). In an upward comparison, co-workers will consider the i-deal to be fairer when granted to an i-dealer with whom they share a

strong exchange relationship. This is because the imbalance is more easily tolerated as the co-workers are focused on the i-dealer's welfare, and the similarities between them (Sherf and Venkatarami, 2015). Moreover, in such relationships, co-workers' self-esteem is less threatened and they feel no need to attribute their inferiority to unfairness (Peters and Van den Bos, 2008). This would then guide them toward benign envy as an assimilative emotion (cf. P4). Indirect evidence of this phenomenon was provided by Lai et al. (2009), who showed that co-workers accept an i-deal more easily when it is granted to a friend, a finding that they attributed to higher fairness perceptions. Similarly, Sherf and Venkatarami (2015) found that employees judge a co-worker's advantageous outcome more fairly when they share positive ties with him/her. In contrast, because negative ties are characterized by a strong self-esteem threat, this would motivate co-workers to distance themselves from the i-dealer and protect their self-concept by attributing the inferiority to unfairness (Peters and Van den Bos, 2008; Sherf and Venkatarami, 2015). This reaction would subsequently steer them toward malicious envy, a contrastive emotion (cf. P4).

P10a: In an upward i-deal comparison, co-workers develop more (less) favorable fairness perceptions in a strong (weak) exchange relationship with the i-dealer, leading them to feel more benign (malicious) envy.

However, in downward comparisons, the impact on fairness is reversed. In a weak relationship, co-workers would be inclined to protect their self-concept and superiority, yet they would do so by attributing their superiority to internal – i.e. fair – causes (e.g., their effort or skills), thereby increasing the distance between themselves and the i-dealer (Sherf and Venkatarami, 2015). This results in more *schadenfreude* (cf. P3). Conversely, in a close relationship, people tend to focus on the similarities between themselves and the other and are highly attentive to the other's needs and welfare, such that a relative advantage would be perceived as unfair (Exline and Lobel, 2001;

Peters and Van den Bos, 2008). This perception eventually leads them to feel sympathy (cf. P3). All of the above explains why, through fairness perceptions, weak exchange relationships result in more contrastive emotions (schadenfreude or malicious envy), while strong exchange relationships lead to more assimilative emotions (sympathy and benign envy), as suggested in previous research (Exline and Lobel, 2001; Huang et al., 2018).

P10b: In a downward i-deal comparison, co-workers develop more (less) favorable perceptions of fairness in a weak (strong) exchange relationship with the i-dealer, leading them to feel more schadenfreude (sympathy).

The exchange relationship will also influence co-workers' behavioral responses. Following the target similarity principle (Lavelle et al., 2007), we expect that those behaviors toward the i-dealer will mainly be influenced, as they constitute the target of such an exchange relationship. Positive exchanges increase employees' identification with co-workers, fostering a motivation to pursue mutual benefits and show care toward them through prosocial behaviors (e.g., helping) (Farmer et al., 2015; Omilion-Hodges and Baker, 2013). In doing so, employees do not only serve others and their exchange relationship, but can also indirectly achieve favorable outcomes, as such behaviors can be rewarded and can help the employee learn and improve (Lee and Duffy, 2018, Podsakoff et al., 2009). In other words, such a relationship further reinforces the motivational tendency behind benign envy, which is aimed at achieving greater outcomes. Similarly, the relationship helps the employee protect his/her own superiority, thereby alleviating the concern and worry about the volatility and uncertainty of one's own superiority experienced through sympathy (Smith, 2000). Hence, we expect the positive reactions toward i-dealers – in response to benign envy and sympathy – to be reinforced in the case of a strong exchange relationship.

In contrast, a weak exchange relationship reinforces the negative reactions toward the i-dealer, which result from malicious envy and schadenfreude. In such a relationship, co-workers experience hostility and antagonism from the i-dealer, which increases the odds that they will retaliate by behaving negatively (Chiaburu and Harrison, 2008). Moreover, such a relationship implies less identification with the i-dealer as well as a lack of concern for him/her, increasing the odds of negative behaviors (Farmer et al., 2015; Omilion-Hodges and Baker, 2013). All of these factors are further exacerbated when co-workers are especially motivated to undermine the i-dealer (motivated respectively by malicious envy and schadenfreude). Thus, when co-workers feel malicious envy or schadenfreude in a weak exchange relationship with the i-dealer, they will react (especially) negatively toward the i-dealer, for example, through social undermining.

P10c: The relationships between benign envy, sympathy and positive behaviors toward the i-dealer are stronger (weaker) in the case of a strong (weak) co-worker and i-dealer exchange relationship.

P10d: The relationships between malicious envy, schadenfreude and negative behaviors toward the i-dealer are weaker (stronger) in case of a strong (weak) co-worker and i-dealer exchange relationship.

Triadic level. At this level, we employ the leader-member exchange social comparison (LMXSC) construct (Vidyarthi et al., 2010). Employees' perceived LMXSC refers to their subjective assessment of the quality of their LMX relationship with their supervisor compared to the quality of the LMX relationship of one or more colleagues. The higher one's perceived LMXSC, the better off one feels compared to colleagues, and vice versa. Building on this construct, we expect co-workers with relatively stronger exchange relationships with their supervisor (compared to the i-dealer) to perceive the i-deal to be more fair. Within the confines of such a relationship, the odds

are higher that supervisors show more respect, support and concern toward them than toward the i-dealer (Cobb and Lau, 2015). This implies that co-workers feel more fairly treated in the i-deal decision from an interpersonal point of view. Moreover, a stronger LMX relationship entails that supervisors grant co-workers more opportunities to voice their concerns, which is essential to ensure procedural justice (Elicker et al., 2006). It also means that co-workers perceive more access to favorable resources (e.g., trust, support and recognition, either now or in the future) than the i-dealer, increasing the odds that they feel distributively and fairly treated (Elicker et al., 2006; Dulebohn et al., 2012). Eventually, the higher level of trust accorded to such supervisors is essential, suggesting that their decisions are considered more fair (Dulebohn et al., 2012).

The above implies that co-workers' fairness perceptions are more favorable in the case of high LMXSC. As a result, co-workers perceive more control over their future outcomes (Cropanzano et al., 2007; Smith, 2000). Because of this high LMXSC and the subsequent favorable fairness perceptions, co-workers are steered toward *schadenfreude* (downward comparison; cf. P3) or benign envy (upward comparison; cf. P4). In contrast, if co-workers perceive low LMXSC, they tend to experience a lack of the aforementioned benefits, which generates perceptions of unfairness and a lack of control. These perceptions result in sympathy in the case of a downward comparison (cf. P3) or malicious envy in the case of an upward comparison (cf. P4).

P11a: If co-workers perceive high LMXSC (compared to the i-dealer), they are more likely to develop favorable fairness perceptions, leading them to more feel *schadenfreude* in the case of a downward comparison or benign envy in the case of an upward comparison.

P11b: If co-workers perceive low LMXSC (compared to the i-dealer), they are more likely to develop unfavorable fairness perceptions, leading them to feel sympathy in the case of a downward comparison or malicious envy in the case of an upward comparison.

LMXSC can subsequently also affect co-workers' behavioral responses. Because of the relatively higher perceived supervisory support (compared to the i-dealer), co-workers are particularly motivated to reciprocate by making the required effort (Vidyarthi et al., 2010). Most notably, they will do so by acting toward the organization, which is the prime way to reciprocate their supervisor's efforts, as well as to protect and enhance their own outcomes (Bamberger and Belogolovsky, 2017). Accordingly, Vidyarthi et al. (2010) showed that LMXSC reinforces job performance and citizenship behaviors directed toward the organization and its representatives above and beyond individually perceived LMX. As such, the impact of benign envy and schadenfreude on positive behaviors toward the organization should be reinforced by high LMXSC, as it further strengthens employees' belief in obtaining a better outcome (benign envy) or in protecting their superiority (schadenfreude). In contrast, low LMXSC can turn co-workers' benign envy or schadenfreude into negative behaviors as they believe their supervisor will not grant them a better outcome in the future or protect their current outcomes. Several studies have shown that benign envy and schadenfreude have a potential dark side to the extent that they can be associated with Machiavellian tendencies (e.g., James et al., 2014; Lange et al., 2018). Such tendencies for manipulation or deception are likely to surface if co-workers perceive low LMXSC.

P11c: In the case of high (low) LMXSC (compared to the i-dealer), co-workers' benign envy and schadenfreude trigger more positive (negative) behaviors toward the organization.

In the case of malicious envy or sympathy, however, low LMXSC would reinforce negative behaviors toward the organization (e.g., neglect). Such behaviors not only alleviate these emotions, but also help employees to retaliate against a supervisor who fails in maintaining a relationship with them compared with the i-dealer (Dulebohn et al., 2012). Meanwhile, high LMXSC could convert malicious envy or sympathy into positive behaviors as these emotions give employees a

sense of control over the acquirement of better outcomes or the protection of their current superiority. This observation is consistent with Khan et al.'s (2017) study arguing that the self-esteem damaged due to malicious envy cannot be restored only by undermining the i-dealer. To fully achieve this restoration, one should also improve one's own situation, yet improvement is only possible when employees perceive that they are able to accomplish this goal. High LMXSC would be the key to achieving restoration as it removes a substantial amount of barriers to obtaining desirable outcomes, which is why positive reactions to malicious envy could ensue. Similarly, the fear/worry over losing one's perceived superiority (cf. sympathy) would not be alleviated only by advancing the i-dealer. An alternative way of securing such superiority and alleviating fear/worry is to transform this emotion into positive behaviors directed toward the organization. This finding is consistent with evidence from the job security literature showing that the fear of losing one's job can motivate employees to enact additional efforts to mitigate that risk (e.g., De Cuyper et al., 2008). Yet, this effort is only considered worthwhile when co-workers feel that it will pay off and give them more secure access or protection in a superior position (i.e., in the case of high LMXSC).

P11d: In the case of low (high) LMXSC (compared to the i-dealer), co-workers' malicious envy and sympathy are related to negative (positive) behaviors toward the organization.

Discussion

I-deals create challenges as they imply the differential treatment of employees, thereby potentially initiating a social comparison process and subsequent cognitive, emotional and behavioral responses among co-workers. Our aim was to develop a process model that outlines when, why and how co-workers socially compare themselves with i-dealers, and subsequently react. Through the development of this model, we offer not only additional theoretical insights but

also a comprehensive future research agenda to further explore co-workers' reactions empirically. We discuss our contributions as well as the implications for research and practice below.

Theoretical contributions

First and foremost, we extend the existing research (e.g., Garg and Fulmer, 2017; Marescaux et al., 2019; Ng, 2017) by discussing how co-workers are likely to react, either neutrally if there is no social comparison or positively/negatively if there is a social comparison. A focus on this wide range of co-worker reactions is important as the existing research has mainly focused on and warned for negative reactions (for an exception, see Rofcanin et al., 2018). By acknowledging and predicting both reactions, as well as recognizing that co-workers can also react in a neutral manner, our model offers more theoretical nuance and insight.

Second, we unravel the mechanisms through which co-workers react. While social comparison has often been identified as the root of co-worker reactions (e.g. Marescaux et al., 2019; Ng, 2017), neither the process itself nor the factors triggering this process have been described. We outline how social comparison initiates a cognitive and emotional process, subsequently resulting in behavioral reactions. In doing so, we integrate the literature on justice and emotions to describe how co-worker reactions are formed. This approach is important as previous research has either adopted a fairness (e.g. Marescaux et al., 2019) or emotions perspective (e.g., Ng, 2017), overlooking the need to consider both to predict co-worker reactions more accurately. As an exception, Garg and Fulmer (2017) recognized the interplay between cognitions and emotions, yet did not describe the conditions under which social comparison is more likely to be initiated, nor did they distinguish between downward and upward social comparison and the consequent emotions one can expect depending on the co-worker's fairness perceptions. Altogether, our model combines different research streams and discusses – in a rich and nuanced manner – how and when

co-workers react to i-deals. The model contributes new insights by capturing social reality in a more effective manner. While parsimony is important, we believe that disentangling the complex social fabric of how i-deals trigger co-worker reactions requires research models that are more nuanced and illustrate the inherent complexity of the studied phenomenon.

Third, past empirical studies have implicitly assumed that i-deals only trigger upward social comparison (e.g., Marescaux et al., 2019) or have focused on only one emotion (e.g. Ng, 2017). Yet, we clearly show the need to distinguish between downward and upward comparisons and between assimilative and contrastive emotions to explain the wide range of co-worker reactions.

Fourth, we identify several boundary conditions that explain the social comparison process as well as the behavioral consequences that emerge in response to the cognitive and emotional processes. Some of these boundary conditions reverse the natural action tendencies, resulting from different types of emotions, such that – for example – benign envy can transform into negative behavior just like malicious envy can be transformed into positive action. This approach not only improves insight into the process through which co-workers react and the conditions under which they do so and how, but also contributes to the general emotions literature, which assumes that assimilative emotions mainly drive positive reactions, while contrastive emotions mainly foster negative ones (Lange and Boecker, 2019; Lange and Crusius, 2015; Li et al., 2019). Hence, we contribute to the scarce research examining the conditions under which this assumed logic is reversed, adding insight on the consequences of emotions (Khan et al., 2017; Lange et al., 2018).

Research implications

Our process model provides a roadmap to guide future empirical research. Employee interviews about i-deals in their team, as well as their experiences with and reactions to these i-deals, might be useful within an initial exploration and validation of the model. The boundary conditions could

be used to select and compare respondents (e.g., to select both prosocial and proself respondents). Quantitatively, diary studies with experience sampling methods would be suitable (Dimotakis et al., 2011). Respondents would fill out a daily survey on whether they became aware of an i-deal, their evaluation of the situation (in terms of social comparison triggers, relative standing and fairness), emotions and behaviors during that day. At the beginning of the study, they could provide information on the boundary conditions. Daily information would allow one to study the process dynamics in a real setting (high external validity) as well as to provide an indication of the time span between the granting of the i-deal and the co-workers' reactions. Moreover, experimental designs in which some of the concepts (e.g., distance between the co-worker and i-dealer, relative i-deals, exchange relationships) are manipulated could be used to test the causality between the variables (high internal validity). Experimental designs are also useful to study the implications of i-deals that are partly shrouded in secrecy or that are unexpectedly revealed, for example, through gossip. Vignette studies are particularly valuable in this context because they employ hypothetical scenarios (Marescaux et al., 2019). In such scenarios, researchers describe a setting in which an employee negotiates an i-deal and manipulate the variables that are thought to influence co-workers. The respondents are subsequently asked to report on the reactions (cognitive, emotional and behavioral) they would have in such a situation.

Our model can also inspire researchers to dig deeper into several of its building blocks or extend the model. We believe it is worth exploring the importance of each determinant of social comparison. Past research does not inform us of which elements (i.e., the relevance of the comparison object and referent and access to information) act as sufficient and/or necessary conditions of social comparison. Relatedly, a noteworthy extension is to further consider the role of secrecy. While organizations can keep i-deals secret to avoid social comparison (cf. our P1c), it

would be naïve to assume that such secrets always stay hidden (Marescaux et al., 2019; Rousseau et al., 2016). Moreover, when faced with a lack of information or incomplete information, co-workers might fill in the blanks. This could eventually result in i-deal ‘paranoia,’ such that employees hold certain beliefs regarding the prevalence and fairness of i-deals in the organization, which may or may not be accurate and may be accompanied by distrust and suspicions vis-à-vis the organization’s intentions (Kramer, 2001). Bamberger and Belogolovsky (2017) suggested that, under a shroud of secrecy, employees even tend to overestimate the outcomes others receive compared to their own, which can be met with malicious envy.

In our model, we focus on social emotions with an emphasis both on the self and the other (Smith, 2000). That being said, emotions with a sole focus on the self (e.g., shame) or on the other (e.g., anger), which do not necessarily require social pain (as envy does), are not impossible to imagine (Blader et al., 2013; Smith, 2000). We would invite future research to explore the conditions under which co-workers experience emotions focused on themselves, the i-dealer or a combination of both to capture the full range of emotional responses. Similarly, we constrain our boundary conditions to relationship-oriented ones within the social triad of i-deal negotiations, yet future research could further identify relevant conditions that extend beyond this constraint. As co-workers and i-dealers are nested within teams, we could imagine the team climate playing a substantial role, distinguishing, for example, between a performance and a mastery climate (Nerstad et al., 2018). The former climate implies zero-sum resource allocations as well as a primary focus on self-interest, whereas the latter climate is built on collaboration and consideration for each other’s welfare and needs. These two climates could produce vastly different emotions and behaviors when employees are faced with i-deals.

Implications for practice

Our model can help managers who wish to reap the benefits of i-deals, yet minimize their costs (e.g., in terms of co-worker reactions). Importantly, our model can help managers understand the diversity in reactions to one and the same i-deal. Imagine, for example, an employee negotiating a personalized work schedule because he/she is a high performer and needs to accommodate his/her specific and challenging family situation. After communicating this i-deal to the direct co-workers, the manager could be confronted with very different reactions. One co-worker might remain calm, displaying no emotions nor behaviors because his/her own family situation is completely different and the i-deal is simply not attractive to him/her. Yet, another co-worker might similarly need such a deal and display envy in a malicious manner. Perhaps this co-worker feels disadvantaged and feels a lack of control over the improvement of his/her own situation (e.g., due to a perception of unfairness, potentially influenced by his/her prosocial nature, a low-quality relationship with the i-dealer and/or a comparatively weaker LMX relationship). As a result, he/she might react counterproductively toward the i-dealer and organization. A third co-worker who finds the i-deal equally attractive, yet feels advantaged toward the i-dealer as he/she has received more favorable i-deals in the past, might feel *schadenfreude* toward the i-dealer, who ‘only’ managed to negotiate a personalized work schedule. As he/she feels in control of the situation and validated in his/her self-esteem, this coworker reacts by working harder to safeguard his/her own i-deals, yet might find covert ways of socially undermining the i-dealer. Such an example, based on our model, demonstrates the complex appraisal process that underlies co-worker reactions.

Our theorizing suggests that, to downplay co-worker reactions, organizations can consider granting i-deals only when they accommodate a unique and specific need that is not shared by co-workers (e.g., to accommodate health or personal problems). Organizations could also take measures to increase the distance between employees, for example, by creating heterogeneous

groups of employees and limiting the interdependence between employees (Rousseau, 2005) and/or decide to keep i-deals secret. Yet, in reality, such measures are not always possible nor desired. Removing the i-deal's power to act as a reward rather than a solution to a problem counteracts the i-deal's potential benefits in terms of motivating, attracting and retaining their recipients. Moreover, organizations do not necessarily always have full control over how work is structured as this depends significantly on the nature of the work, and, as mentioned above, secrecy might not necessarily be a sustainable strategy in the long run as it entails certain risks.

Rather than attempting to avoid social comparisons, organizations could take measures to ensure fairness and trigger beneficial emotions and positive reactions. The latter goal is especially important, as we argue that emotions for which we would naturally expect positive reactions (e.g., benign envy) can – in some circumstances – foster negative behaviors. Hence, this risk should be mitigated by creating an environment in which employees are less predisposed to negative behaviors (i.e. prosocial co-workers), where such behaviors are discouraged and where employees perceive opportunities to achieve higher outcomes for themselves as well. This recommendation implies that supervisors should be actively coached to create high-quality LMX relationships with all team members and foster good exchange relationships between team members. Moreover, supervisors could be trained in emotion-focused coping techniques to mitigate at least the negative emotional and behavioral consequences of i-deals by helping co-workers change their appraisal of and feelings regarding the situation.

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Figure 1. Conceptual framework

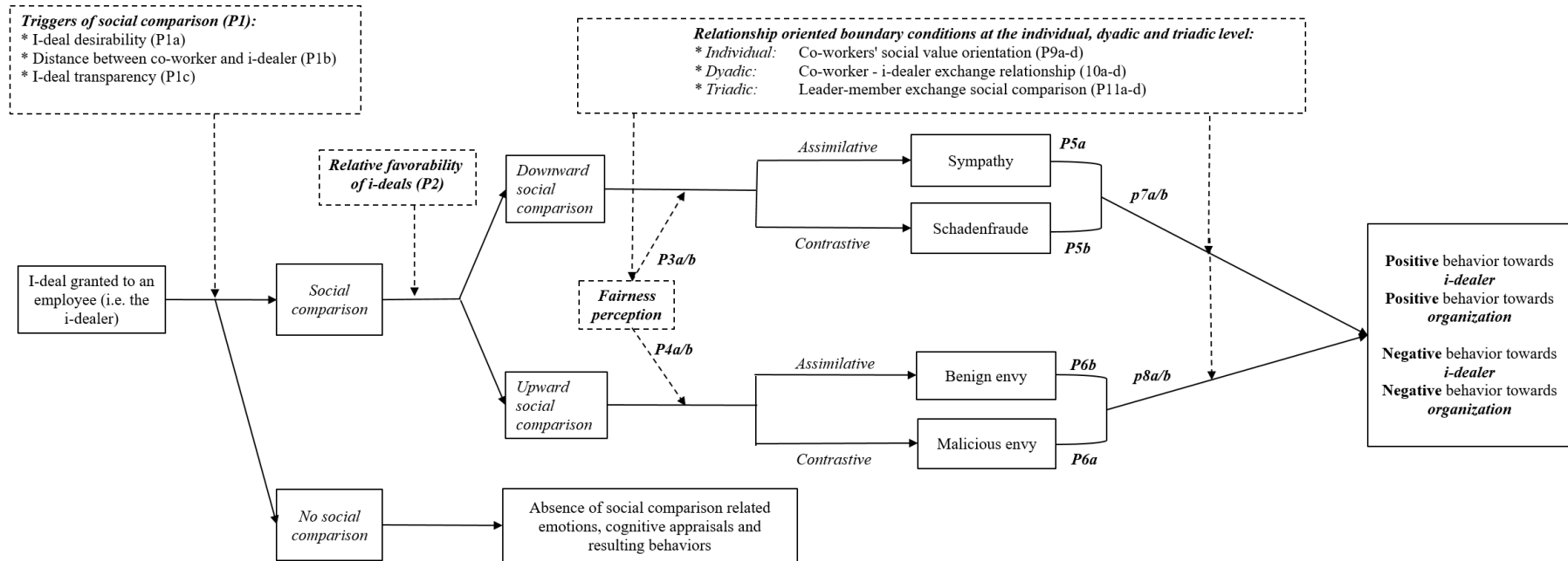


Figure 2. A typology of co-workers' emotional and behavioral reactions to i-deals

